

SHIPBUILDING IN DUXBURY: ONE TOWN'S INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE

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Today we are turning our interest in history to industry. The only big industry, the one to dominate the town of Duxbury, was shipbuilding. And that ceased more than one hundred years ago. We will talk about it with pride and we talk about it with wonder; but more, I think, we talk about it because of the mark it stamped on the whole of Duxbury—a mark that will last as long as the town does.

Shoemaking, brickyards, hatters' shops, saddlers' shops, grist and sawmills have been with us from time to time; cranberries and clams continue with us; but no other industry comes near the whole maritime activity we call the shipbuilding era. Shipbuilding in Duxbury cannot be limited to the colorful years of 1820-1840 when it was in full swing. That was the peak period when the town lived and breathed maritime activities—the years that were full and prosperous. The history of shipbuilding in Duxbury is as old as the town itself, and the date when it started coincides with the first time a settler, perhaps John Alden, rebelled at walking the nine miles around the bay to Plymouth and built himself a boat.

Every creek became a landing place frequently mentioned in deeds, important enough to be in inventories of the 17th century estates. The inventory of the estate of Joseph Wadsworth, dated 1689, includes "a boat, a building"—mentioned in a very general way in a list of possessions, nothing out of the ordinary. He had a boat, a building. Gamaliel Bradford had a wharf on Island Creek about 1730, which he referred

to as Old Rogers' Wharf, indicating it had been there for some time. Christopher Wadsworth had a wharf on a creek by his farm from which he sent small craft to Boston carrying firewood, and this, too, was about 1700.

There are countless other similar references. For every wharf there were vessels, and that means shipyards, however small, that were in operation before 1700. Records were better kept after 1700. So it has been long said that Thomas Prince built the first boat in 1719 in his own shipyard. That is true. He did. And he owned the shipyard. But the deed by which he bought his property clearly states that he bought a homestead farm including a shipyard, and that yard had been in use at least as early as 1687, which points up the fallacy of accepting the so-called records without checking the fine print in deeds and inventories.

(If I may digress, it's always embarrassing for a local historian to have to correct predecessors who have had considerable standing in the community for two hundred years or more, particularly for some of us who have only been in the town fifty years. But it also is the duty of the local historian to tactfully correct those errors. Don't be so bold as to do it with a red flag. But the errors must not be allowed to stand. There are ways of changing them. Read the fine print!) The terms "landing places" and "wharfs," or "a boat and building" are often missed in inventories as we concentrate on buildings and household possessions.

Shipbuilding, maritime trade, and fishing might have gone on in this modest way for some time if the Revolution had not come along. That war took Duxbury men to far places: to Virginia where trade was on a grand scale, often with Europe; to New York where they saw well-established trade with foreign ports. And, as we sang after the First World War, "How Ya Gonna Keep Them Down on the Farm After They've Seen 'Parree?", so after the Revolution, there was no return to the slow peace of farming-for-existence in Duxbury.

The beginning of larger scale shipbuilding changed the patterns of life and land use in Duxbury. Where shore acres had formerly been used only for hayfields and salt marsh hay, and the houses and farm buildings had been on the inland ends of farms, now the shore acres were valued as business locations. And it was not the original owners who began to use those shore acres. It was a few far-seeing men who could foresee the trends and possibilities who bought up the shore ends of the old farms, the acres along the waterfront. In fact, it was two families who just about bought up all the bay frontage that is now the village. Samuel Drew and Samuel Windsor had jointly operated a small shipyard on the back side of Captain's Hill for some years, and from that small beginning came most of the maritime activity.

The Drews, the sons of the early shipbuilder, began to build on the north bank of Blue Fish River. The three Windsor brothers, Samuel, Nathaniel, and Joshua—sons of the Windsor of the first yard—bought up almost all the village waterfront. And John Weston, who had worked in the first yard behind the hill, saw his grandson get a foothold on Powder Point where a Weston had had the

foresight to marry into a family already there.

So it was the second generation of shipbuilders from a small yard who grasped the opportunity of the times and got into the shipbuilding business on the ground floor. The shipbuilding era was roughly fifty years and in that time it brought about a change in the whole town—the first significant change since the Pilgrims. Everyone was directly affected by it. In the first place, everyone was employed wholly or seasonally in the shipbuilding business. For some it was an opportunity to apply their trades more profitably. For others it presented an appealing list of new trade possibilities—a far wider range than their fathers had. Carpenters and blacksmiths had only to apply their skills to the new business, but a young man could become a sailmaker, caulker, ropemaker, painter, or cabinetmaker. He could even make charcoal for the forges if he was a loner, or he could raise the beans and cattle for beef that made up the provisions on every ship, or he could cut and haul timber for the shipyards.

All these jobs came along when a few men established their shipyards along the way. And of course there were also some who had to make the salt and salt the fish that were part of the cargoes. In addition to the builders there were the men who took the vessels to sea. It has been said that between 1820 and 1840, when there were five hundred heads of families in town, one hundred of them were ship masters—one in five at sea as captains of vessels. And with two hundred more mates and seamen, that left only the town fathers, the doctor and the minister not on the ship payrolls. That is not quite true for there is a record of one minister investing in a share in a

...p. It was lost in a storm, taking his investment down with it. A good chance for an agnostic to make a remark, isn't it!

No account of shipping days in Duxbury would be complete without mention of the Westons. They were the biggest in every way. And while their story has been told over and over, some of it bears repeating, if only because it is typical of the industry. Ezra Weston got into the maritime trade shortly after the Revolution. He had the advantage of already owning a fine location at the head of the bay, thanks to his father having married the right girl. But he had native-ability that put him just a little ahead of the other shipbuilders and owners, and that enabled him to branch out wider, risk more. His judgment was sound. His every venture prospered. He used a strategy of carefully calculated procedures coupled with confidence in his shipmasters, to the extent that he allowed them considerable latitude in trading. We have one oft-quoted letter of instructions to a captain that shows how he planned his ventures. This is only one of a dozen or more letters that we do have, but it is typical of them. This letter is addressed to the captain of a sloop that was already in a North Carolina port, and it is dated the 6th of February, 1794. He says:

Capt. Arthur Howland, Sir: You being at present master of the sloop, Jerusha, at port of Plank Bridge, my orders to you are that you load your vessel with corn, white oak, red oak lumber and proceed to the West Indies to such port or ports as you shall think most to the interest of your owner. And sell your cargo on board at the highest there going. After loading your sloop with salt, you will purchase with what remains of your cargo, rum, molasses, coffee, sugar, cotton or whatever you think

will be most to the interest of your owner. And proceed to Duxbury, the port of your discharge, so as to be at Duxbury, the port of your discharge, by the first of next April. And for your encouragement in trading, I promise to pay you 5% commission in each and every port that you shall trade in after you leave North Carolina till you arrive in Duxbury, the port of your discharge. And in North Carolina, 2½% commission on the net proceeds of your cargo. You will observe all the laws and customs in each and every port that you trade in, in every part of the business, in the best manner for your owner's interest. You will keep a good command on board your vessel, and let me hear from you by every opportunity. I shall rely much on your prudent management of my affairs. So, God send you a prosperous voyage and a safe return to your owner. Ezra Weston.

Can you think of anything he left out?

Ezra Weston II worked right along with his father, and the Weston family interests stretched into more areas than any other shipbuilder family's. Weston owned and operated a shipyard with a master builder in charge, a rope walk a quarter of a mile long with a master ropemaker they had brought in from Plymouth, a sail loft, a forge, tar pits, spar shop, all sorts of shops that went along with the building, several farms that raised the produce that provisioned the ships, wood lots that furnished the firewood and timber, a store for the convenience of shipworkers and neighbors, a bank for the same reasons, and, when the War of 1812 cut off the supply of sail cloth from England, the Westons bought a factory and made it themselves. They

invested in woolen mills, real estate and stocks. They maintained an accounting house in Boston, and Ezra rode between Duxbury and Boston in a chaise at night so that he could sleep on the trip and not lose any time.

The Westons were noted for hiring Duxbury men for their vessels, frequently bringing a farm boy up from cabin boy to master mariner all under Weston training. It can also be noted that the Westons kept the business in the family.



King Caesar House, Duxbury—
Weston Home

Other families in Duxbury—the Windsors particularly—operated the same way, producing enough sons to take care of all the important jobs in the business.

Probably more important to Duxbury than the fascinating stories of the shipbuilding era is the lasting effect on the town. Shipbuilding changed more than the occupations and incomes of Duxbury. Suddenly a whole new section developed along the bay, parallel to the shipyards. A village arose where a short time before had been only fields and marshes. Where formerly a family required a farm of one hundred or more acres to get along, now there were houselots of one acre or a few acres, with new houses paid for by the new industry. The modest cape, or gambrel, or even the occasional two-story farm house gave way to the large federal style house, fitting for the newfound wealth. A village elite was the result of the prosperous time.

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I suppose one should mention in passing the influx of men who worked in the shipyards, who came from inland towns just for a job. They lived in boarding houses through the week. They worked long hours, hard work, and they celebrated their off hours with hard drinking. They were much aware of Duxbury ladies and those ladies thought them rowdies. One corner in an otherwise respectable neighborhood was called the Devil's Corner because the ogles loitered there. And one whole section of the new village became "Sodom," where the bad men hung out.

While the shipbuilding era was generally prosperous, it was also a time of fluctuating fortune for some. Fortunes were made or lost on a single voyage or a single vessel. Many a man had made his fortune by the time he was thirty, enough to last him a lifetime if he were prudent. Many lived well the rest of their lives on the fortunes they had made at sea. In most cases, the mariners made out better than the shipbuilders. The fortunes of the Westons and Windsors never dipped, but the Drews and the Wadsworths, for example, had some bad times, ending their careers in bankruptcy. Records of failures are found in deeds of forced sale, of sheriff's sales, sometimes including the sale of the family home, tragic results of lost ships or unprofitable voyages. One village wharf had ten owners and another had twenty-eight, and the sale of those shares tells the ups and downs of some of the merchants.

The end of shipbuilding in Duxbury was more abrupt than the start. The demand for larger vessels, particularly steamships, could not be met in this shallow bay. So the business moved to Boston. Many of the

workers went where the work was, and, overnight, Duxbury dropped back into a quiet town. The main highways through the village and the bridge over Blue Fish River are reminders of that era. The big white house we still call the "shipbuilder house" (King Caesar House) remains our pride. The historical society owns three of the historic houses and the town has the benefit of several endowments founded in ship merchants' fortunes. Duxbury stopped building ships one hundred years ago, but we will always have that era with us in legend and in fact.

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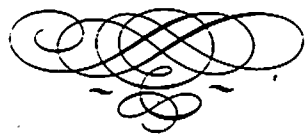
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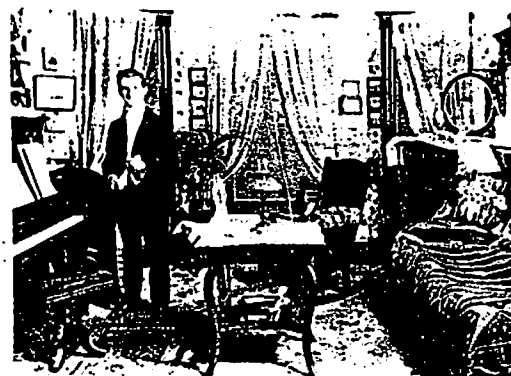
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SHIPBUILDING

"At Home in Worcester",

the new exhibit at the Worcester Historical Museum, takes the visitor on a tour of Worcester homes in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Photographs of local domestic interiors with full array of lace curtains, tassels and fringes are combined with furniture and objects which have remained in Worcester homes and have been lent for the occasion. The exhibit will be on view through April.



The Danforth Museum, Framingham, illustrated the impact of the railroad on Framingham in its exhibition "Around the Station: the Town and the Train", on view through December. Above is an 1876 view of the South Framingham station.



Heritage Plantation of Sandwich has recently acquired a silver wine can, circa 1793, crafted by Paul Revere. The vessel bears the monogram S.D.S., and is listed in Revere's ledger as having been made for Stephen and Deborah Smith, early settlers of Machias, Maine.

SHIPBUILDING SOURCE OF ARTICLE

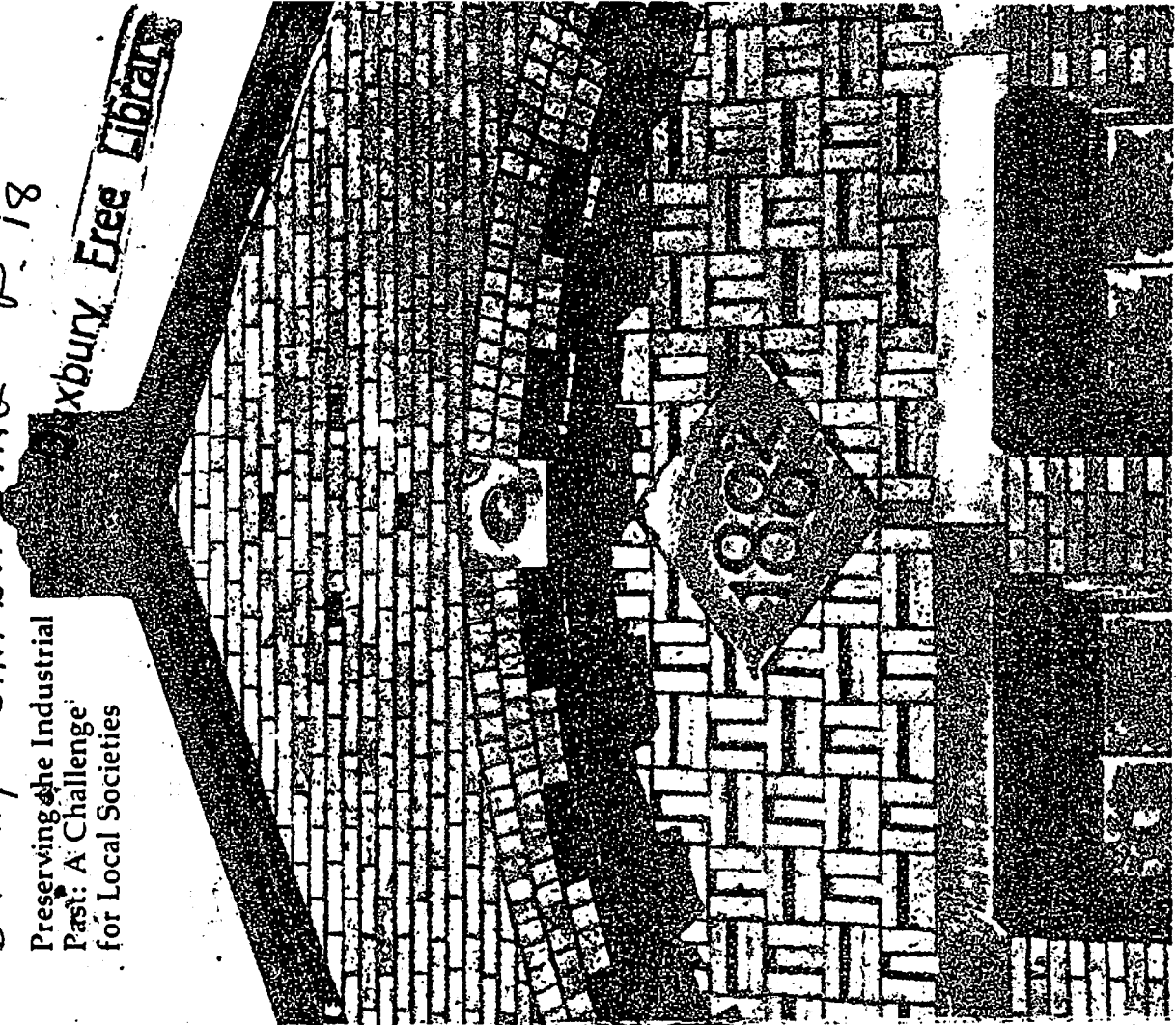
The Bay State Historical League BULLETIN

VOLUME 5, NUMBER 1&2 1978-79

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Preserving the Industrial
Past: A Challenge
for Local Societies

Duxbury Free Library



Bay State Historical League
G.A.R. Memorial Room 27
The State House
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